FAITH AS COURAGE
I John 4:13-19
November 12, 1978

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The American advertising industry, having long relied on the motivating power of our sensual appetite, our materialism and need for status, and having recently exhausted nostalgia, has now discovered, apparently, one of the oldest and most powerful motivators of all - fear. Among the more offensive commercials on television currently is a group which plays on rather straightforward physical terror. A woman is in the shower, at home alone, apparently. An ominous figure lurks at the front door and with a terrifying knife easily slips the lock. Anyone who saw Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho is at that point shivering in his or her chair and quietly calculating how to afford the foolproof burglar alarm which is the point of the exercise - a masterful and effective presentation.

The other group is more gentle, subtle, not quite as hysterical. The new life insurance commercials are pointed at what the philosophers call ontological fear, fear of nonbeing. Men are most vulnerable to this kind of fear, and so the commercial eloquently dramatizes the reality of the husband's nonbeing. The widow goes to the office to collect the effects, but not the life insurance policy he should have purchased. The son drops out of college to keep the shop open, verbalizing ontological fear: "We talked about everything, but we never talked about what would happen if you weren't here."

That is strong medicine, indeed. Fear is a powerful and often hidden human motivator. It has frequently been the handmaiden of religion. The phenomenal success of the evangelist Billy Sunday, it is said, was his ability to make the horrors of hell so vivid that his listeners could feel the flames licking at the seat of their chairs. Martin Luther testified that the most powerful early religious influence in his life was the classic painting of the Last Judgment which portrays the damned dropping into the lake of fire.

Adolf Hitler, in our time, was perhaps the most gifted politician in understanding and exploiting the mass power of fear. There were plenty of things to be afraid of in the Weimar Republic. Hitler knew that if he could focus fear on one object he could unite the German people. He knew that fear automatically becomes hatred, and that the combination of the two is the necessary ingredient for tyranny. With great skill he took the raw material of anti-semitism and molded it into racial fear, and it became irrational and powerful hatred, and it was the cement of the Third Reich.

Fear of Communism has motivated this nation for three decades, and persuaded it to fight an Asian war against the best advice of its most knowledgeable political, moral and military leaders. Do you care to imagine what the world might look like today if love, not fear, had been the motivator; had the incredible investment of American lives and skills in Southeast Asia built hospitals and schools and roads, and had American dollars been loaned to businesses as development capital in Vietnam and Cambodia and Laos?

Fear of outsiders —

Fear is powerful. It is often irrational. It is frequently behind the worst mistakes men and women make. But it is a reality, a normal part of the human condition. In our primal innocence we are born with two fears - the fear of falling and the fear of loud noise. All the rest are acquired - learned. Some of our acquired fears are healthy and creative. Fear of hunger motivated early men to dig a little ditch and plant a few seeds. Fear of drowning causes us to be cautious

around water. Sigmund Freud defined the difference as the normal fear of snakes in the jungle and the abnormal fear of snakes under the carpet in one's apartment.

Our common fears are not terribly dramatic. Most of us, I think, are afraid of sickness, debilitating, disabling illness. As a rational fear it motivates us to take care of ourselves, get a physical examination yearly and live in moderation. As irrational fear it can paralyze us into never taking the baby out of the house, for instance, to avoid exposure to a virus: or to ignore the small lump we discovered, out of what has become one of the most irrational fears of our day - the fear of cancer. We are afraid of old age and the dependency on others which often accompanies it. We are afraid of being alone. We, particularly we middle class Americans, are deathly afraid of failure. And when that fear becomes iirational it can paralyze us into inactivity and apathy and depression.

The psychologists tell us that there are deeper, more profound fears to which we are subject. Otto Rank, an early psychoanalyst, talked about "life fear" and "death fear". But perhaps the most helpful teacher in identifying the dark, subconscious fears of our humanity was the theologian and philosopher, Paul Tillich. Tillich was the one who taught a generation of theological students about ontological fear, the dread of nonbeing. Reading Tillich is not easy going, but for those who have the tenacity he teaches us that this basic, elemental dread is part of our humanity, whether we are philosophers or bricklayers: that full humanity depends on facing it, acknowledging it, and then affirming oneself inspite of it. There is a point in the academic pilgrimage for most theology students when Tillich's ideas about nonbeing are very important, worn like the badges of our new intellectual expertise. At that point in my pilgrimage I had the privilege of taking a course under the legendary Professor. Enough time has passed that I am now able to admit that I didn't understand very much, mainly because Tillich never learned to speak English very well. In fact, it was not uncommon for him to launch into his lectures in German until a student summoned the courage to tell him what he was doing. I found myself, one day, standing on a corner in Hyde Park, Chicago, with Tillich beside me - my once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to exchange ideas with the greatest Christian theologian of the twentieth century. My mind, fortunately, went blank. And all I could come up with was, "Nice day, isn't it?"

But Tillich did teach me something that is confirmed by most of us around the age of forty; namely, that the thought of our nonbeing is shattering. He gave me a name for something every pastor, physician, and psychologist learns every day: that there is a dark night of the soul: that the fear of dying is not nearly as powerful as the sense that one day I will be no more: that the world is going to go merrily on its way without me. Lucy, in Peanuts, is a consistent Tillichian. One time Charlie Brown, after a series of devastating personal experiences, exclaims, "I wish I had never been born." To which Lucy responds, "Why the theological implications of that are staggering."

And now to the text. I read this morning from the First Epistle of John, one of three very brief letters ascribed to John, the apostle of Jesus. Tradition has it that John wrote the Epistles in his old age, when the years had refined his faith and when he was the last person alive to have seen Jesus. There is a lovely Robert Browning poem about it, called "A Death in the Desert".

> "...there is left on earth
> No one alive who knew (consider this!)
> - saw with his own eyes and handled with his hands
> That which was from the first, the Word of Life.
> How will it be when none more saith, 'I saw'?"

The tradition is that John wanted desperately to get the essence of it down, not the life of Jesus, but the essential stuff of the new life he had experienced. He reduced it to love. God is love - we abide in God and He abides in us when we love. And then this exquisite, tiny gem: this sentence so pregnant with meaning that it speaks to us in a way we can't really describe. "There is no fear in love: perfect love casts out fear." That is so good the preacher wants to leave it alone: let it stand and speak in whatever ways it can to each heart. Love isn't afraid - of death or dying, of suffering or persecution, of living and loving and giving and risking and failing. Love isn't scared.

There are echoes of it throughout the Bible. Faith keeps coming up looking like courage. People of faith are brave. When we strip away all the descriptive adjectives from faith it seems to rest in the person who looks into some ominous darkness and marches right on in. The Old Testament Lesson, for instance: God's people are on the banks of the Jordan, peering across the troubled waters into the Promised Land. Moses is dead, Joshua is at the helm and God says, "Be strong and of good courage, be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Fear is a reality for us: will we get sick? Will we succeed? Will our children be all right? Are we making the right decisions? Is our marriage strong enough? Will our friends respect and admire us? Beyond the fear of nonbeing, we're afraid of the fact of change. Rumblings in the international monetary system, inflation that persists, the dissipation of our moral will in the world, nationalism and Marxism in Africa, and the literal disappearance of moral certainties within our common life: it all leaves us anxious - frightened. We know, personally, the meaning of the Broadway invocation "Stop the World, I want to Get Off". Sometimes fear can be so real that we want to jump in the nearest hole and pull it in after us. Sometimes fear paralyzes us.

Commenting on the frightening new world in which we live, Rollo May writes: "We are called upon to do something new, to confront a no-man's land, to push into a forest where there are no well-worn paths. To live into the future means to leap into the unknown, and this requires a degree of courage for which there is no immediate precedent." (The Courage to Create, p.2).

Being a whole person today demands courage, a brave act of self affirmation in the face of a lot of very real fears.

The Shakespearean dictum "To Be or Not to Be. That is the question" is posed with great intensity and poignancy. Fear backs away. Fear retreats. Fear lets someone else make the decisions. Fear tries to find meaning in the past and hopes the future will go away. Courage says "I am. I will". I shall never forget the privilege of witnessing the power and truth of that idea, when I took a group of white, middle-class High School students to visit Operation Breadbasket in Chicago. The Reverend Jesse Jackson was drawing thousands of inner city blacks to Saturday morning meetings in a theatre on Halstead. Beginning early in the morning the Format was always the same. A series of speakers and entertainers would warm up the audience. Finally Jackson would appear. He would stand at a lectern for a time and then shout "I": the audience shouted back "I". "I am". Again the response, louder now "I am". "I AM SOMEBODY" - and as one they rose to their feet and shouted, "I am somebody."

It was an exercise in self affirmation - for people whose entire lives were lived in an environment which told them they were nobody's. The product was courage: the courage to stand up and be. Jackson always knew that problems of racism and poverty would never be solved by well-intentioned government programs, administered by middle-class whites, but by black people who knew they were somebody and had the courage to stand alone.

Courage, as the philosophers have understood it, depends on a strong sense of self worth. You can't affirm yourself if you don't believe you are worth anything. You can't cope with fear if you concede that the fear is bigger than you. The philosophers have understood that frightened people are almost always people who don't feel very good about themselves.And we come now to the bottom line. How do we get it? Talking about it helps us to understand but it doesn't make us courageous. Determination helps a bit: stubbornness, physical strength seems to add to it. But the fact is that courage comes as a gift: someone else has to give it to us. Love, John knew, is what casts out fear. The courage to be comes finally from love experienced and love given.

I was moved this summer by the accounts of the trial of Anatoli Shcharansky. Shcharansky, you will recall,is one of the Soviet dissidents who was arrested and tried for treason. His crime seems to have been that he was a member of the Helsinki Watch Committee, formed to monitor Russian compliance with the Human Rights Accords signed in 1975,and that he had repeatedly applied to emigrate to Israel to join his wife. The way out was to confess, which he refused to do through sixteen months of imprisonment. This summer he went on trial, and to no one's surprise was convicted and sentenced to thirteen years at hard labor.

His concluding statement to the court, just before sentence was pronounced, is a new epistle of faith as courage. It is a modern and dramatic illustration of the truth that there is no fear in love. Listen to it:

> "Five years ago I applied to emigrate to Israel. Now, as never before, I am far away from my dreams.
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> "Those close to me know that I wanted to exchange the life of an activist in the Jewish emigration movement here for a reunion with Avital in Israel. For more than 2,000 years, my people have been dispersed. Wherever Jews were, they would repeat every year: 'Next year in Jerusalem'. At present I am as far as ever from my people, from Avital, and many hard years of exile are in store for me.
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> "To my wife and my people, I can only say, 'Next year in Jerusalem'. To this court, which decided my fate in advance, I say nothing."
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> (Time Magazine, July 24, 1978).

Love casts out fear. In homely little ways every parent and every child has known it. One of the important tasks of parenting is to banish the fears of a little one. We know intuitively that fear of the dark may be helped by leaving a night-light on, but the real remedy is the strength of a loving parent. Sometimes a child's fears are authentically ontological: "What happens, Daddy? Why do people die?" And we learn from experience that the answer that banishes fear is not a well-reasoned treatise on eternal life, but a strong and gentle hug.

Love casts out fear. We learn in marriage that all sorts of fears become manageable in the strong haven of mutual love. In the hospital, facing surgery, we know the courage that comes as a gift from someone who loves us enough to stand with us. And sometimes, in the dark night of the soul, when we are utterly alone and when we are consumed by self-doubt and fear, we have learned, mysteriously, that God loves us.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news that we are loved: loved totally by a Heavenly Father who will stand with us; who will be with us wherever we go. The Gospel is the story of a man of courage - who not only accepted His own death, but seemed to reach out and embrace it: a man who literally climbed up on a cross knowing He was loved and in love for all men and women.

There is a gift in that for you and me. There is in that supreme gesture of love the courage to be, the courage to live.

The Gospel song which was popular a few years ago, put it simply but eloquently:

"Put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee."

An old and very wise man, twenty centuries ago, said it this way:

"There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear."

Amen.

God, our Father, we confess our fears. We confess our inability to cope with them all, alone. So, help us to know Your love. Help us to love, perfectly, wholly. Grant us courage. In Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.